

Excerpt from

The Exercise

by

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## PROLOGUE

There is no distinction between what we think we know and what we know: what we think we know is all we know. Mauro says it's a matter of simplification, reduction to the bare bones, a strategy that we apply without being aware of it. We are unable to tolerate the weight of infinite possibilities – *we simplify, we reduce* – we choose a possibility that we sense is right for us – *we simplify, reduce* – the only arbitrary choice we believe in out of all the infinite possibilities. We believe in it to the point of denying the evidence, constructing industriously on that single one, and the more capable among us go on fabricating for twenty or thirty years. Some even manage to build on arbitrary choices long dead together with those who made them; fortunate arbitrary choices can reproduce and flourish and become cities, empires, financial giants.

My arbitrary choice was Giorgia. Giorgia was the story I told myself, in a continuous, oblivious narrative. Around her I had constructed a dimension complete with physical laws, an itinerant world that followed her everywhere – spilling over into the past, lengthening into the future. If what happened hadn't happened, she would still be there, I could go back to kidding myself about what I thought I knew, which was all I knew: the same given moment, eternally. Unrepeatable. Unreproducible.

I can't go back, my creation was taken from me. As Mauro says, from now on, for me, Giorgia will forever be an exercise.

I went quite far with my exercise, so far that I feel as though I can reconstruct everything from the beginning.

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The beginning takes place in the medium-large outlet of a huge retail chain, on Via Pitteri, not far from the apartment where Giorgia and I live. In these big box chain stores everything is organized in the same way, the maps of the aisles, the arrangement of food and non-food items; the products are always the same too and stocked in incomprehensibly excessive quantities. In these kinds of places, no matter where, everything is identical – the floor plans, the merchandise, the consumers – and a series of confusions arises from those diabolical similarities: you have no idea where you are, and just when you think you know, the map has a slight deviation that moves the fresh-baked bread from the corner on the left, as in Certosa, to that on the right, as on Via Rubattino – because that's where we are, right? – and everything is turned upside down, making you experience a baffling sense of disorientation.

Giorgia hates supermarkets, and she knows I hate them too. She hated them even before she started working there, me, only since they hired her. Yet we longed for that

supermarket the way you would a baby; we kept an eye on it for a long time during the troubling months of her unemployment, wondering where the three-step interviews would take us.

Giorgia now knows what it's like to work in a place that she always tried to avoid as a customer: she loathes the supermarket. The fact that everything pretends to be the same in all supermarkets makes people unhappy; for the first ninety-one days, Giorgia looked directly at each one of them, hundreds of faces flowing past the checkout, along with the conveyor belt, hundreds and hundreds of them, all yellowish under all the yellowish lights. No one is happy to be doing the shopping, she's sure of it, not even the couples with ice cream and warming lubricant; they too start to brighten up a little only when they get out of there.

Giorgia describes her psychosis as *my empathetic problem with people*.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### *Divergences*

There is a common room in the clinic: two long tables in light green laminate, a TV bolted onto the wall. Tacked to the cork board are paintings by the patients, orgies of flowers in broad brushstrokes, abstract motifs – in one of them a black background flaunts a red brooch in the center. The canvases are a panorama for Giorgia, who is sitting serenely in a chair, a plastic fan in her left hand. She looks around with a bored air, occasionally stroking the folds of her robe with the care she would give to a sumptuous gown.

There are three of us, me, Mauro and the clinic's chief doctor, concealed behind the one-way glass in the observation corridor. From here we can see everything. At this hour the common room should be closed: they keep it open only for Giorgia, because it's too cold for her to take her walks outside, and when forced to stay in her room she tends to become fidgety. The team is showing considerable patience but I know that it is only thanks to the orders of the director that Giorgia is granted so much freedom. The evolution of her illness has captivated him. He studies her closely through the glass, silently, his hands thrust into the pockets of his white coat. This time I wanted Mauro with me, so that he can explain to him what I am sure I can't explain.

"So then, you imagine that Giorgia is performing a script? That's your theory?"

The medical director doesn't take his eyes off of her.

"I don't imagine that," Mauro says. "I'm certain of it."

He is as worked up as he was a week ago, when Giorgia spoke and he responded with the right words. He says he recognized the lines immediately, that there is no way he could be mistaken: in the last three months, during our visits, he has done nothing but read passages from *Twelfth Night* to her.

"It's the first major production we staged together," Mauro insists. "She's performing her role."

Giorgia hadn't spoken much, the first time: the exchange of lines between her and Mauro hadn't lasted more than a minute – then she withdrew into herself again, and no longer reacted to his cues. Giorgia's voice stunned us, then disappeared so quickly that for a long time I thought I had imagined it following our night of drinking. We restrained ourselves, Mauro and I. He kept trying to prompt her with a few lines; I even went so far as to touch her at one point, taking her hand, but she showed no sign of wanting to be roused. On the way back, in the car, neither of us had had the heart to tell Amelia about it – and once I got home I talked myself into believing that Giorgia's response had been a fluke, that in any case there was nothing significant about what had just happened: her

voice was the same, but it was still only an instrument of that something else that inhabited her. It seemed to me that the “something else” was becoming more powerful than Giorgia: so I hoped she would go back to not speaking again.

But Giorgia’s voice had not stopped. On Monday, we found her arguing with the nurse because the woman had stepped on the skirt of her garment. We watched her from the door, without going in: sitting in her pajamas on the edge of her bed, she eyed the nurse with a disconsolate air. Mauro, huddled with me in the corner of the doorway that Giorgia couldn’t see, said it immediately: “She’s acting.” I could hear my own disbelief and fear in his whisper, but also a detectable hint of excitement.

“As if being exposed to the reading had reawakened in Giorgia the memory of her identification with the character...” the doctor turns to me. “She showed no sign of recognizing you, I imagine.”

I shake my head and look away. She treats me as if I too were part of the script, a walk-on: the more she looks at me, the sooner I stop existing. It’s worse than the psychotic episode she’d had earlier. On that evening, Giorgia’s Peter Pan had not held up for long – just long enough for her to go offstage and attempt to fly down from the window. When we grabbed her and forced her to the ground, the seizure, the screams had started; Mauro and I had been injured holding her still and all our pleas had been in vain. We hadn’t yet realized it, but Giorgia was gone. I look at her now, serene, mesmerized by the white accordion folds of the fan that the nurses gave her.

“Is she following the script faithfully?” the doctor asks, turning to Mauro. “There are names she repeats frequently, people she looks for. We’ve been monitoring her this week and it doesn’t seem like she’s simply reciting lines from memory.”

“No, as a matter of fact. Giorgia is doing what she should do: she’s going along with the character. Acting is not about memorizing lines and then repeating them. Bringing a credible character to life on the stage means using the script to expand his or her identity, to develop it to the point of predicting how that character would react in situations and contexts beyond those contained in the work itself,” says Mauro, his voice vibrant in the silence. “Giorgia has always shown an instinctive talent in this. In *Twelfth Night*, as in any Shakespearean work, the subtext is almost non-existent and all you can cling to lies in the character’s words. Giorgia had succeeded in constructing a perfect, comprehensive Olivia.”

“So, the character we’re seeing would be a woman in a Shakespearean play?” the doctor is very grave.

“That’s right, Giorgia is playing the part of Countess Olivia from *Twelfth Night*.”

We remain silent, observing through the glass. The doctor rocks on the tips of his shoes, leans closer, practically touching the surface of the window.

“It happened because of the decrease in the dosages, right?” I ask. “You’d said there was the risk of an acute episode.”

“Partly, yes. However, the reaction to the new dosages is unexpectedly positive. Every previous attempt was a failure, we didn’t obtain anything even remotely controllable,” the doctor says, his breath fogging up the glass. “From what I see now, though, the psychosis is acting within a partially predictable construct. Giorgia is following rules. Not mine, not hers, but those of a script.”

“So you consider that an improvement?”

“Mr. Bonini, you know what I think of that word. We are not talking about improvement, we are talking about a change in her condition. Giorgia has gone from a non-communicative and essentially unmanageable psychosis to a structured psychosis. In other words, her world follows norms that we can at least intuit. This gives us an unforeseen advantage.”

In the room, Giorgia begins to stroll around the table. She holds her back erect, in an elegant posture that isn't hers. It's scary: it's as if someone has slipped into her skin, filling the space behind her eyes, bringing her body back to life. Mauro is not as taken aback – maybe because for him the character is no stranger, he has already seen her enacted in Giorgia.

“We'll review the prescriptions again. The new dosages could trigger a crisis, or shatter Giorgia's current reality, or both. If we were successful in bringing about even a minimal separation between her and the character, I might think of putting her in a psychodrama therapy group.”

“What's that?”

“The theatrical framework of psychodrama observes the patient bring his own existential difficulty to the scene. It is not very different from the approach that Giorgia is already used to: except that in the therapeutic course a director chooses the scene to be performed and guides it using the various techniques at his disposal.”

Mauro lights up.

“I think I've heard of it. There's a center for it, in the city.”

“I believe you are referring to the center operated by Dr. Fusconi,” the doctor nods. “We have an open channel of communication with the doctor, we have been working together for almost ten years.”

“But is it really effective?” asks Mauro.

“It's been a valid alternative for several of my patients.”

“How come you're only telling us about it now?” I ask.

The doctor barely glances at me.

“Such a possibility wasn't even thinkable in the condition Giorgia was in just two weeks ago.”

“Why not start now, if the therapy is effective?”

“It's not that simple, Mr. Bonini. Psychodrama requires a certain contact with reality, so that the patient's experiences and traumas can emerge in the performance.”

The doctor gestures, bidding me to look over at Giorgia. She is absorbed in studying the garden, whispering to herself.

“Giorgia is still prey to her psychoses. She would not be capable of acting out her pathology on stage and viewing it objectively. By forcing the therapy on her now, we would only trigger other serious psychotic episodes. Imagine if someone showed up at your door and told you that everything you consider to be your life is a stage production, a theatrical performance in which you are merely a character.”

Giorgia closes the fan, puts it to her cheek, peers out as if awaiting visitors.

“And imagine if that same someone responded to your requests with conflicting stimuli: you ask for a glass of water, the stranger tells you that water doesn't exist, has never existed; you want to go out, and the stranger prevents you, reminding you that the outside world has been destroyed by fire – an event of which you have no recollection.

Try to picture a complete reversal of every dimension that you believe to be true: you will have a vague sense of the kind of violence that Giorgia would be exposed to at this point, if she is started on a therapy that is not suited to her state,” the doctor explains, clearing his throat. “You know what I’m talking about: it’s what happened at the first crisis, when Giorgia believed she was something and the world around her denied her that identity. Remember how she rebelled against the constraint.”

I feel Mauro’s eyes on me, and sense the same memory in him; the two of us realizing that Georgia had been attempting to jump out the open window only after instinctively grabbing her by the arms.

“We must be patient, observe her reactions and bring her as close as possible to the normality she knows.”

“Do you think that will happen?”

“Are you asking me if Giorgia will recover?”

“Yes. Do you think she’ll ever be the same as she was before?”

I don’t have the nerve to hold the doctor’s gaze while I wait for the answer.

“I was in Normandy, two years ago. Gorgeous scenery. You may have heard of Mont Saint-Michel: the bay is famous for its tides. The water rises and recedes twice a day, submerging then exposing everything. It’s spectacular and dangerous,” his voice glides over the window glass. “There is no before and after, in Giorgia. We’ll find a way to stem the tide, the water will carve out another route, and we’ll curb it again. Giorgia has always been this. We can’t choose a character for her to play.”

“But isn’t that exactly what she’s doing, playing a role that she has been taught to recognize as hers?” Mauro’s question fades away, his presence recedes.

“So then, you’re saying we have only one option: to find a script that contains Giorgia’s character, or something that at least resembles her?” the doctor cannot resist a cheerless laugh. “No. We can’t do any more than what we’re already doing. We must be patient.”

I’m hardly listening. I’m watching Giorgia imprisoned in the display case, and she’s so far away she seems to grow smaller.

It’s only when we get to his house that I notice Mauro’s silence. After saying our goodbyes to the doctor, we didn’t talk anymore in the car, and I don’t remember why we’re here. He shuts off the engine, lights a cigarette, then gets out. I feel so drained that I don’t follow him right away, I sit there staring at the folded scripts forgotten in the inner pocket of the car door. I’m as empty as if I’d been scooped out with a ladle.

After a few minutes, I drag myself out of the car and make my way through the gate and the front door, both left open. Inside, Mauro is still smoking – it’s the first time I’ve seen him smoke in a room other than the basement. I go to the couch and slump down. I close my eyes, I hear him walk around the dining table, then the smell of cigarette smoke comes closer; I feel him looking at me.

“I don’t agree.”

I open my eyes and find him standing in front of me. He points two fingers and the cigarette at me.

“He’s wrong.”

I can guess what he's referring to, as if during the drive back, in silence, we had spoken.

"I don't think he's wrong," I say.

"Not about everything, of course. He's the doctor. But he's wrong about Giorgia."

I feel edgy, I can't sit still anymore. I go around Mauro and walk over to the window.

"It's us," I say.

"What?"

"It's us, we're the ones who are wrong," I repeat it louder, and my words bounce around the room.

"How do you mean?"

I sense Mauro close by again. I figure it no longer makes sense to avoid the subject that we've been dodging since the meeting with Giorgia's aunt. As he stares at me from across the table that stands between us, I know he already knows.

"She's sick," I say. "We didn't realize it. What we saw wasn't the truth."

"You're wrong too. The illness isn't all there is."

"She was sick and we didn't want to see it."

"Giorgia exists."

Mauro snuffs out his cigarette in the crystal ashtray, doesn't look away.

"Giorgia exists. We didn't imagine her. I remember her, you remember her."

"I don't know what I remember anymore. I don't know if that was the truth."

"Don't even doubt it for a minute: Giorgia is who you and I have come to know, she's everything we've seen."

Mauro's eyes challenge me to contradict him.

"Now it doesn't matter anymore," I say.

"On the contrary, it's essential. I've been thinking about it since the doctor said it: we can't choose a character to have her play. That's true. But we don't have to choose a character."

I feel like I've lost his train of thought, or that he's left something out.

"What are you talking about?"

"Giorgia remembers: her memory must have endured, somehow. We need to help her remember the right things."

"I'm not sure I understand..."

"All I had to do was read the script to her, Filippo," Mauro says, now feverishly wide-eyed, an excited smile quivering on his lips. "It's about choosing the right script. It's about writing it."

I begin to see where he's going with this, and the absurdity of what Mauro is proposing floors me.

"You're not really thinking of..."

"Listen. Stop a moment and listen to me. Giorgia managed to be herself, without the illness, for a very long time. You've been together three years, and in three years she's never slipped. Do you have any idea how much effort such a performance requires?"

I instinctively grab the back of the chair in front of me.



“She wasn’t deceiving you, Filippo. She wanted to be herself, without the illness. She can do it. She remembered how to go back to being Olivia, she can remember how to go back to being Giorgia.”

“This is science fiction.”

“Why not try? She remembered a script she studied six years ago.”

“She wasn’t performing a script with me.”

“No, she wasn’t. She had learned to exist without the illness.” Mauro places his hands on the table, leans towards me. “Let’s try. She’s still in there and maybe we can get her out. If you were lost, like she is, wouldn’t you want someone to help you?”

My head is spinning. I’m exhausted, the room is closing in on me. I escape Mauro’s gaze and return to the couch a moment before my legs start to give way. It’s the terrifying idea that’s beginning to take hold of me: I struggle to resist it.

“Let’s try” Mauro doesn’t give up, he comes over to me. “What do we have to lose?”

“This is not one of your productions,” I spit out sharply.

“No, it isn’t!” Mauro kneels in front of me, on the carpet. “Listen to me: let’s write it. Let’s write the script as if it might work, let’s kid ourselves that it will work and then we’ll decide what to do with it.”

We go on looking at each other in silence for a long moment. He knows right away that he’s won, he knows it’s because I’m desperate.

“What would you give to go back to how it was?” he asks.

“Anything.”

“Let’s start with this.”

“I don’t know how.”

“I’ll help you. I’ll give you the form, the framework, and you give me the content, everything you remember about her. We’ll reconstruct her together.”

“It’s insanity.”

“Without a doubt.”

I put my head in my hands, they’re sweaty.

“I can’t believe we’re having this conversation.”

“Don’t focus on why, focus on how.”

“Do you really think it could work?” I say faintly.

Mauro shakes his head, attempts a cautious smile.

“I don’t know,” he says. “Meanwhile, let’s write.”